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Morality and Nonviolent Protest: The Birmingham Campaign

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Revolution comes about when people are unhappy with the circumstances in which they live. A revolution may come about in many ways. It may come from a declaration of war or a military coup. In few select circumstances, it comes in the form of nonviolent protest. This was the case during the Birmingham campaign in the Civil Rights era. The leaders of the movement taught the participants in the numerous sit-ins and marches that, if they were hit or abused in any manner by those that opposed them, not to hit back. So despite the atrocious crimes against these protesters, they marched on, assuming the moral high ground. However, when measures of wrong and right are to be tested, "What is morally correct?" is a question that is in constant debate. Philosophers have argued about the meaning of the truest form of justice since ancient times. Although the Birmingham protesters did not attack anyone, they used the violence against them to gain sympathy. In the end, due to the very nature of man, nonviolent protest was used as a strategy rather than because it was the overwhelmingly noble means of protest.

Birmingham, Alabama was a racially segregated city up until 1963 when members of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began a movement to stop discrimination against the African American population.¹ Though the movement itself was conducted in a peaceful nonviolent manner, opposition from the white civic authorities was often cruel and bloody. Images of protesters both young and old were projected across the news and made the American people think deeply about the problems within their country. Eventually, the protests paid off and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, prohibiting racial discrimination in public accommodations, facilities, transportation and the workplace.² The outcome of the protests was positive, but it was a long and brutal journey for all of those involved.

¹Bruce J.Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2008) 78-79.

²Ibid, 94-95.

Morality and Philosophy

One of the most elaborate criticisms of justice is described in Plato's *Republic*. Plato describes a discussion between the philosopher Socrates and members of the Greek elite during a time period of change in Athens. Each brings forth what they believe is the definition of morality and what it means to be just. Cephalus, the man whose home the discussion takes place in, is the first to offer his definition of justice. He states that it is giving back what is owed. It at first seems like a sound description of what it means to be just, but then Socrates breaks down what Cephalus has said. He counters that if one borrowed a weapon from a man, but when one went to return it, found him insane, would one still return the weapon? Cephalus acknowledges that the weapon should not be given back to a man lacking sanity, which destroys what he believes justice to be. Polemachus comes forth with a different definition of justice: he claims that it is doing good to friends and harm to enemies. Again, Socrates ruins this idea of justice by asking, "How do you know who your friends are?" He also questions how this definition would apply in a time of peace. Polemachus understand Socrates reasoning and does not press the point that he originally made. Thrasymachus, another man whose thesis of justice is destroyed by Socrates, is convinced that Socrates is merely playing with them and knows what justice is. By the end of Plato's *Republic*, though, there is no answer to what it means to be just.³

In fact, the debate on morality continues in the *Republic* between Socrates and two brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus. They hypothesize that social constructs are what dictate morality. The weaker impose laws in order to protect themselves from the stronger. Overall, it is the consequences of man's action that decide whether he will perform an action. Adeimantus questions whether anything is inherently good in itself or if every action is done for rewards or to

³Plato, and Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic, 1991).

avoid punishment. Socrates decides that in order to best face this question of morals, they must first create a city. In doing so, the men realize they cannot create a perfect society. Socrates calls for equality among women, destruction of the family and the rule of a philosopher king. The last is the least feasible to the men. A philosopher would have the knowledge to rule, but alas does not want too. Instead it is politicians who have the desire to rule but do not know how to. Socrates thus believes a moral world does not exist, but justice does. It can be known, but not explained.⁴

The ancient philosophers were not the only ones to debate the issue of morality. Niccolò Machiavelli, the “father of modern philosophy,” questioned morals as well in his work, *The Prince*. His ideas strayed greatly from those of the ancients. Vice and virtues were imaginary in the mind of Machiavelli. Instead, a ruler must merely appear to be virtuous. Morality is only needed as a tool to control the masses. In his philosophy, the people would be given the power, so it would be the people that needed to be influenced about whether their ruler was just. One of the most well-known Machiavellian ideas is that it is better for a ruler to be feared rather than loved. Morality exists only in the sense of public opinion.⁵

Of the postmodern philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the most well-known. He believed that the greatest of man had a certain will to power. That innate desire for supremacy is what would be what would drive them to be in a position of power. Morality was not really a concept rather than something natural. For example, a vulture is not seen as cruel for going after a lamb—it is merely in the nature of the vulture to eat and survive. The very elite of man are similar to the birds of prey. They do not destroy because of any concept of right and wrong; they

⁴Ibid. .

⁵Niccolò Machiavelli, and William J. Connell, *The Prince: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

destroy because it is in their very nature. Instead, rules of society and religion were created by the weaker man in hopes to tame the man of power. Morality is then only a device of the weak.⁶

Perhaps the philosopher that would most identify with the nonviolent protester is Henry David Thoreau and his work, *Civil Disobedience*, which is in reference to the issue of slavery and the Mexican-American War. He believed that government had too much of a role in deciding what was the morally correct objective for the country. He thought the real power should lay in the masses and that they should be able to determine, based on their own consciences, the right path for their state to follow. Albeit, he also thought that citizens had a duty to be informed and vote respectably. He then proposed the idea of civil disobedience. He wrote, “Unjust laws exist; shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?”⁷ His theory was that by ignoring the authority imposed on the people by government, change can occur. Overall, it seems he believes that morality is the view of the individual.

So what then is morality? It is not a subject that is clean cut. Morals are the distinction between right and wrong, but what then really is right and wrong? The great philosophers all had their individual beliefs of whether it could exist or even if it should exist. Because the concept is so loose, how then can anyone claim to be moral? Is it solely based upon the society in which they live? Or is it the ideals of a select few that are dispersed to the masses? The Birmingham Conflict is proof that a few leaders can instill in the minds of many what is noble and just. Nonviolence in protest, therefore, is an advertising tool of sorts. If enough people believe it is

⁶Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 2000).

⁷Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Civil Disobedience by Henry David Thoreau*, Web 18 Sept 2013.

the only way to make change, than they will participate. It only takes one to start a chain of events based on an idea.

Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement

Martin Luther King Jr. is well-known throughout the United States. He was an advocate for change and the advancement of African Americans in the United States. He worked on many nonviolent campaigns throughout the South, including Birmingham in 1963. A particularly interesting aspect of King was that he was a scholar. He studied each of the great philosophers and was heavily invested in what he read. During his time at college, he came into a sense of inner turmoil. His biography states, “During this time period I had about despaired of the power of love in solving social problems. I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. I felt that the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. I could not see how it would work in social conflict.”⁸ The young King did not believe in nonviolent protest that he would later adopt.

King was born into a religious family and studied at a seminary. So why was his faith so shaken? Part of his confusion was due to the time period he grew up in. World War II and its aftermath greatly affected his worldview. Though his upbringing was based on Christian morals, observing war and atrocities, such as the atomic bomb, altered him. He also saw the poor treatment of the general black population. However, he also states, “Perhaps my faith in love was temporarily shaken by the philosophy of Nietzsche.”⁹ King did not agree with Nietzsche’s take on morality; he found it horrifying. The glorification of power, which Nietzsche insisted is innate in man, repulsed King. The fact that anyone had that particular outlook on life is what made King question his own beliefs.

⁸Martin Luther King Jr. and Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Intellectual Properties Management in Association with Warner, 1998), 23.

⁹Ibid.

Philosophy was the initial destroyer of King's beliefs, but it was also what would save him. His faith was restored upon studying Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence and pacifism. In his study of Gandhi, King educated himself about the concept of *Satyagraha*. *Satya* is truth, which equals love, and *agraha* is force. On his newfound viewpoint, King says, "As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform."¹⁰

Gandhi had a major impact on the implementation of pacifism in the civil rights movement. King was not the only one who drew inspiration from him. Bayard Rustin, a civil rights leader taught students and protesters how to practice the methods of Gandhi. Rustin, an African American Quaker from Pennsylvania, grew up learning tolerance and pacifism. Gandhi himself invited Rustin to attend an international pacifist conference scheduled to take place in India in February 1949.¹¹ Gandhi was assassinated before this meeting, but Rustin still attended and was educated by those who were closely associated with Gandhi. He would even use Gandhi-inspired tactics throughout the civil rights movement. One he used was requesting that in an act of protest, those accused of breaking the law voluntarily turn themselves in to authorities before arrest warrants were issued.¹²

Based on Gandhi's ideology, Rustin and King created the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Though King was the president, Rustin was the behind-the-scenes man. They hoped to form alliances and amass enough nonviolent protestors in order to create change in the public works system. Specifically, they focused on fighting poverty, racism and worker's

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Devon W. Carbado, and Donald Weise, "The Civil Rights Identity of Bayard Rustin," *Texas Law Review* 82, no. 5 (April 2004): 1133-1195 *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost 1154.

¹²Carbado, 1156.

rights.¹³ Overall, the group was a successful organization and would be influential throughout the civil rights movement.

Factions in the SCLC and Misunderstanding Nonviolence

Rustin, however, would not be a part of SCLC for long. King was aware that Rustin was a homosexual and understood the potential for scandal if it became public, but he believed that his organizational skills and knowledge were essential to the campaign. When Adam Clayton Powell Jr., an influential African-American congressman, threatened to reveal that there was a secret romantic relationship between King and Rustin, King's opinion on Rustin's homosexuality began to change. King did not mention the issue with Rustin, but when Rustin offered his resignation from SCLC, King readily accepted.¹⁴

Initially, Rustin was hurt that a man that he worked with closely over the years would so easily turn him away. Eventually, he came to realize that King was working for the best interest of the movement. In an interview, Rustin said,

Dr. King came from a very protected background. I don't think he'd ever known a gay person in his life. I think he had no real sympathy or understanding. I think he wanted very much to. But I think he was largely guided by two facts. One was that already people were whispering about him. And I think his attitude was, look, I've got enough of my own problems...Secondly, he was surrounded by people who, for their own reasons wanted to get rid of me—Andy Young in particular, and Jesse Jackson.¹⁵

Personally, Rustin was offended by the actions of King, but with great understanding, Rustin was able to move past the issue. For him, the greater issue of social justice was always the forerunning priority.

¹³ Dierenfield, 52.

¹⁴ Carbado, 1171

¹⁵ Bayard Rustin, "The Civil Rights Struggle," *Jewish Social Studies* 27, no. 1 (January 1965): 33-36.

King also had misunderstandings about what it truly meant to be nonviolent. He was nearly always under significant amounts of pressure, and his life was constantly under threat. It only made logical sense that he kept a gun close for protection.¹⁶ However, that did not correspond with the nonviolent philosophy. The philosophy of Gandhi called for nonviolence in all acts. Self-protection was not a viable excuse to cause a human being harm. Over time, King retired his firearm in order to maintain credibility with nonviolent organizations.

In King's autobiography he states how Nietzsche's glorification of power is what made him lose some of his faith, but in the end, power was what drove King's being. Many of the young people who joined the fight for racial equality noticed this about King. His mannerisms led them to start calling him "da lawd." This was a dig on what the youth saw as King's own self-glorification. Somehow he became more than man and evolved into an idol. People would follow him whether his tactics were honorable or not.

Goals for Birmingham

Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in the United States. Martin Luther King Jr. outlined his goals for the city in his "Birmingham Manifesto."¹⁷ He started by stating the battles that they had already won, even though some cases came to a dead end. He continued to state his grievances due to failure of the court systems and state governments. In the end, he offered a hope. King would push for the ideals that government set up for all citizens. He looked to pursue the Jeffersonian doctrine that, "all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these being, life, liberty and the pursuit of

¹⁶Carbado, 1166.

¹⁷Martin Luther King, Jr. "Birmingham Manifesto," *The Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change*. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Sept. 2013.

happiness.” Basically, the Birmingham Manifesto said that change would be fought for until it came forth.

As with other protests, the Birmingham fight would consist of similar tactics. There would be sit-ins and protests. They would boycott local businesses that refused to desegregate their stores. All would be conducted nonviolently. If the protesters were attacked, they would not fight back.

Birmingham was specifically chosen for its history of racial segregation and an active Ku Klux Klan group that terrorized the black community. The city itself was nicknamed “Bombingham” due to the threat that some violent whites imposed. King actually was hoping that Eugene “Bull” Connor, the public safety commissioner, would openly use brutality against the protestors so that the rest of the world would see. This strategy was outlined in Project Confrontation, often referred to as Project C.¹⁸

During the campaign King was jailed due to disobeying an injunction against marching on city hall. While in jail, he wrote his famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.¹⁹ In it he criticized the moderate whites and the clergymen who did not agree with the Project C campaign. He references the philosopher Thomas Aquinas while making his stand clear:

I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all.” Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.²⁰

¹⁸Diernfield, 80.

¹⁹Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. N.p., Web. 21 Oct. 2013.

²⁰King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

King thus justifies why he is in jail in the first place. Overall, he is fighting for justice, and he will not stop until change has come. Throughout the letter he continues his statement of why the nonviolent campaign must continue.

Violent Opposition

Even though the protestors themselves did not use violence in order to fight their battles, this did not mean that there would be no bloodshed. Those who participated in marches and sit-ins would often be brutally beaten by white onlookers who felt these African Americans were stirring up trouble. Officials of the town and state did not make the process any easier. In fact, they made it worse in most situations. They were determined to keep the city segregated.

One of the worst aggressors in the entire civil rights movement was Commissioner of Public Safety, “Bull” Connor. He would use whatever means necessary to stop the protests. His tactics included unleashing German Shepherds on the protestors, as well as turning powerful fire hoses on them in order to painfully get the protestors to stop their march. These aggressive strategies to counter the protests came into question, especially when it came to the Children’s Crusade in 1963.²¹

The Children’s Crusade was considered a controversial tactic organized by the Rev. James Bevel. The plan was to have thousands of children march instead of adults who had important prior obligations such as their jobs. Children were virtually unattached to any essential institution besides school.²² They could easily march and be thrown into jail without consequence. However, Connor would use his dogs and water hoses on these children. Many of them understood what they were marching for; however, their innocence was taken from them.

²¹Diernfield, 82-83.

²²Ibid.

The supposed nonviolent leaders of the civil rights movement in fact presented these children with a great deal of violence.

At events like the Children's Crusade, there was always some form of media on hand to capture the action. Images of crying children and bloodied faces became mainstream. (See Appendix) The violence of the movement was spread throughout a nation. Upon seeing these images, people could not help but realize that something was wrong. They readily gave their sympathies to the wounded children. In the end, those who opposed violence ended up using it as a tool to gain support for their cause. They had seen the reaction to adult protestors and still decided that their children should march. Knowing what they did about the dangers of protest, they manipulated the minds of America to profess that they supported their cause. Would Gandhi have agreed to such a system of protest? It is questionable.

The White Nonviolent Perspective

Although white officials were the main opposition to the Birmingham Campaign, the movement coincided with the early beginnings of the counter-cultural movement. Many nonviolent white protestors felt a strong affiliation with the fight for equality. One who was particularly outspoken about his beliefs was Jerry Rubin.²³ He was a white activist throughout the 1960s and 1970s who participated in protests against racial segregation as well as Vietnam. He seemed to understand the feelings of the African American population and stated in his book, *Do It; Scenarios of the Revolution*, "When a policeman shoots a nigger, that's 'law and order.' But when a black man defends himself against a pig, that's 'violence.'"²⁴

In Rubin's mind, African Americans and hippies were one and the same. Anyone seeking social or political reform was thus affiliated and a part of each other. Rubin alludes to so

²³Jerry Rubin, *Do It; Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).

²⁴Ibid, 142.

much in his perspective of George Wallace, the governor of Alabama during the Birmingham campaign. Rubin writes, “Wallace attacks niggers, students, hippies, demonstrators, pacifists, intellectuals, pot-smokers, commies, liberals. We make all kinds of distinctions between us. To Wallace there are no distinctions. He does his best to unite us.”²⁵ The injustice in the South was enough to create an army of those willing to fight for equality.

Another radical white protestor was Abbie Hoffman. Although not a follower of Gandhi, he recognized that his actions determined what was moral. His book, *Revolution for the Hell of It*, though written in a stream of consciousness, professes these ideals. He writes in his manifesto, “Once one has experienced LSD, existential revolution, fought the intellectual game-playing of the individual in society, of one’s identity, one realizes that action is the only reality; not only reality but morality as well.”²⁶ Though different than the African Americans religiously-based ideas of nonviolent protest, Hoffman saw that the only way to fight injustice was by taking action.

Thomas Hayden, a white protestor and organizer of the Students for a Democratic Society in his youth who would become a California state senator, wrote a memoir on the sixties in which he reflects on the violence of the time period. He saw the era as one of unpredictability and chaos. Looking back at this age Hayden reflects,

In the case of John Kennedy, the subsequent murders of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy—I would include Malcolm X as well—would inflict a permanent lesson, in the street sense, on the sixties as a whole: *Any real possibility of radical reform, a peaceful transition of power, will be blocked by assassins, whether directed by conspiracy or by reactionary rage.* The project for ending the cold war and addressing poverty and racism through a reformed government was a real possibility save for the unpredictable factor of violent backlash.²⁷

²⁵Rubin, 144.

²⁶Abbie Hoffman. *Revolution for the Hell of It*. (New York: Dial, 1968), 8.

²⁷Thomas Hayden, *The Long Sixties: From 1960 to Barack Obama* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2010),

Essentially, Hayden saw that there would be violence, even with the most noble of causes to fight for.

Even as someone who believed in a reformed society, Hayden could not help but question the tactic of nonviolence. These questions consisted of, “Should nonviolent direct action continue to be the cutting edge? Was voter registration a more effective assault on southern segregation? Could there be interracial cooperation, a beloved community, and if so, how? Or was it better to organize along the lines of black power and form alliances from the basis of a greater equality?”²⁸ As the times changed, even those committed to the common good questioned the best way to address societal problems. Hayden was able to see that nonviolent protest ironically was violent. Violence became the catalyst for social change.

Turning Toward Violent Tactics

It was only a matter of time before leaders of the various African American groups proposed an alternative route to equality. Nonviolence bred frustration among the protestors. They watched their peers and their children being abused by white mobs, while police looked on unapologetically. Bombings continued killing innocent people. The nonviolent ideal was starting to crumble.

Malcolm X was one of the most influential presences in the civil rights movement. Malcolm came from a broken home: his father was brutally murdered and his mother was forced into a mental facility. His siblings were then dispersed into various foster homes. Though initially successful in school, Malcolm was affronted with a racial prejudice. One of his teachers who made a negative impression on him once said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve

²⁸Ibid,111.

got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger."²⁹ After ruining Malcolm's desire to be a lawyer, the teacher recommended that Malcolm become a carpenter—a much more acceptable job for a person of his skin color. The other students were told to shoot for the stars with their hopes and dreams.

This upbringing along with other events would lead Malcolm to the Nation of Islam. This sect deemed that all members of the white race were "white devils." Through his preaching, Malcolm urged that if the white devils attacked, the black man should fight back. This view varied greatly from the one presented by Martin Luther King Jr. Instead of nonviolent protest, Malcolm believed in going into the slums and working to help African Americans realize their own self-worth. Autobiographer Alex Haley noted, "Many close observers of the Malcolm X phenomenon [declared] in absolute seriousness that he was the only Negro in America who could either start a race riot—or stop one."³⁰ A new kind of power was rising from the ashes of the nonviolent movement.

Even though Malcolm is often associated with hate, his views are not so different from the views of the great advocator of peace: Martin Luther King Jr. King preached that blacks and whites could live as one in a desegregated environment. Malcolm, on the other hand, did not believe in the movement to desegregate. His approach to King's movement was:

I can't turn around without hearing about some "civil rights advances"! White people seem to think the black man ought to be shouting 'hallelujah'! Four hundred years the white man has had his foot-long knife in the black man's back – and now the white man starts to wiggle the knife out, maybe six inches! The black man's supposed to be grateful? Why, if the white man jerked the knife out, it's still going to leave a scar!³¹

²⁹Alex Haley and Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. (New York: Ballantine, 1992), 36.

³⁰Ibid, 395.

³¹Ibid, 270.

Even though they may not have agreed on how to create change, both men had a common goal: they wanted to elevate the status of the African American and help them see their worth.

Another movement associated with violence and white hatred was the Black Power and Black Panthers movement. One of the main leaders was Stokely Carmichael. Originally, he was the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Carmichael, in fact, marched beside King in protest, but his views began to stray from King's. While being attacked, Carmichael mentioned that he stuck out his chest in order to nonviolently break the wrists of those attacking him. His membership in the SNCC would come to an end as his ideals began to change.

Like Malcolm X, Carmichael saw white men as oppressors. In his black power speech he said,

Now, then, in order to understand white supremacy we must dismiss the fallacious notion that white people can give anybody their freedom. No man can give anybody his freedom. A man is born free. You may enslave a man after he is born free, and that is in fact what this country does. It enslaves black people after they're born, so that the only acts that white people can do is to stop denying black people their freedom; that is, they must stop denying freedom. They never give it to anyone.³²

Carmichael adapted a natural law philosophy to the struggle of the African American people.

Natural law suggests the use of human nature to reason decides what moral behavior is. Times were changing. The days when nonviolent protest seemed like the only moral option were over. As soon as the white man became an enemy to be taken down instead of a mere opponent, violence became a new means of coercion.

The Black Panthers were unlike the peaceful protestors who sang songs of pride while marching along the streets of Birmingham. Originally, the group was created in order to protect

³²Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power" speech, 1966.

African Americans in the slums from police brutality.³³ The assembly evolved into a militant organization in which the members of the party were armed. Race riots ensued in which both Panthers and police were killed. Alex Rackley, a member of the New York Chapter was brutally murdered because he was thought to be a spy.³⁴ It is clear that the frustration and changing youth morphed the civil rights movement ideals of peaceful protest into a state of deranged violence. Ultimately, whether cries for social change start with a campaign for nonviolence, or if the cry is militant, someone somewhere will be getting hurt.

Nonviolence as a Strategy

Both the nonviolent protestors and the more militant groups led to chaos. That said, the peaceful protest cannot be considered any more proper because the results were the same. However, nonviolence can still be looked at from a strategic standpoint rather than a moral one. Though the Birmingham Campaign had its faults, it was far from a failure. The merchants of the town, after the stress of a boycott agreed to desegregate public areas and hire some blacks. The summer following the events in Birmingham, fifty cities in the South desegregated in order to avoid the experience that Birmingham had gone through. The 24th Amendment was ratified in order to outlaw poll taxes in federal elections. These protests prodded President Kennedy into stating that segregation was “a moral crisis.”³⁵ These changes came about due to nonviolent protestors.

Leslie Macfarlane, author of *Justifying Political Disobedience*, takes a closer look at what it means for an individual to dissent from the political realm. He focuses on the concept of justification by both the authorities as well as those acting in disobedience. Macfarlane writes,

³³Diernfield, 127-128.

³⁴Edward Jay Epstein, “The Black Panthers and the Police: A Pattern of Genocide?” *New Yorker*, February 13, 1971.

³⁵Diernfield, 84-86.

“All political regimes need to justify their actions, for all political action requires justification; a failure or, still more, a refusal to do so might be said to constitute conditional grounds for disobedience whenever it takes place.”³⁶ In the case of the Birmingham Campaign and the overall civil rights movement, the protestors had good cause and reason to disobey unjust laws. They were justified.

Philosopher Thomas Aquinas discussed unjust laws in his *Treatise on Law*.³⁷ In this work Aquinas looks at what an unjust law is. In general, he believes that law should be practiced in order to find the common good. If a law is enacted that does no such thing, it is unjust. It is also unjust if it goes beyond the power of those making the laws, and if it benefits only the lawmaker. The laws that racially segregated the South were not providing for the common good. Instead they were giving the advantage to one group of people over another. Aquinas would have seen that these discriminatory laws were unjust and proposed they be disobeyed. However, he said an unjust law should only be obeyed if by disobeying it further damaged the group that was being discriminated against. Though the civil rights protestors did ensue further grievances, eventually the legislation would change.

Looking farther into the actions of those participating in protest, the ideas of nonviolence must also be justified. Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth did a study on the logic behind choosing nonviolence as a viable means of protest and found...

...major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns. There are two reasons for this success. First, a campaign's commitment to nonviolent methods enhances its domestic and international legitimacy and encourages more broad-based participation in the resistance, which translates into increased pressure being brought to bear on the target. Recognition of the challenge group's grievances can translate into greater

³⁶Leslie J. Macfarlane, "Justifying Political Disobedience." *Ethics* 79, no. 1 (October 1968): 24-55. <http://0-www.jstor.org.helin.uri.edu/stable/2379189>

³⁷Thomas Aquinas and Richard J. Regan, *Treatise on Law*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2000).

internal and external support for that group and alienation of the target regime, undermining the regime's main sources of political, economic, and even military power. Second, whereas governments easily justify violent counterattacks against armed insurgents, regime violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime. Potentially sympathetic publics perceive violent militants as having maximalist or extremist goals beyond accommodation, but they perceive nonviolent resistance groups as less extreme, thereby enhancing their appeal and facilitating the extraction of concessions through bargaining.³⁸

To put it simply, nonviolence works. The Birmingham protestors knew that they would be more successful by avoiding direct violent action. Becoming violent only gives the opposition more reason to oppress them.

Conclusion

It is clear that the nonviolent campaign in Birmingham was successful. Although there was violence, change in public policy came about. Other Southern cities chose to desegregate in order to avoid having their city defamed by protestors. However, just because the movement was successful, does not mean that it was any more moral than a violent protest. The term morality is loose. Philosophers have been unable to define the term since the beginning of time. So how then can any cause claim to be moral?

The Birmingham campaign also consisted of power struggles and misunderstandings of nonviolent themes. Children were used as props in order to get sympathy. Violence was used as a means of advertising the struggle of the black population. Because of the discipline required for nonviolent activism and lack of immediate change, it was only a matter of time before the civil rights movement itself accepted a more militant approach. The fight for equal rights was moral, but the ways in

³⁸Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

which the nonviolent protestors went about it were not necessarily so. Nonviolence in protest was a strategy, and one that worked. Despite the rhetoric of morality, it was not done because it was any more morally correct than any other form of protest.

The purpose of this paper was not to demean the events that took place during the Birmingham campaign or the men and women that were involved. The protestors fought a brutal battle filled with chaos and pain. The individuals chose to battle a war that would end up changing the course of their lives as well as the lives of future generations. Today, though there are still plenty of race issues, the American government can no longer legally allow for racial discrimination. This illustrates the success of nonviolent tactics in the civil rights movement.

That being said, nonviolence tactics have flaws. The violent opposition to the peaceful protestors was used as a means of advertising the cause. The protestors in Birmingham knew how vicious “Bull” Connor was and that is why they decided to march while he was in charge: they knew he would be brutal. In fact, they would use children to intensify the sympathy of the observers even more. Generally, nonviolence is seen as the moral, noble way to create change, but upon taking a different perspective, it is evident that there is a ruthless aspect to this form of protest.

When looking at history, perspective is an essential piece of determining an objective view of any event. That is what this thesis is about. One cannot merely separate events into “good” and “bad.” History is nearly ever that clean cut. The so-called “winners” and “losers” can be ambiguous. When morality is concerned, even less can be determined as absolute, because morality is an ambiguous term.

History looks at the events of a time period and the men that were involved. Philosophy then in turn looks at understanding the nature of mankind. This discipline looks at the reasons why man acts in the way that he does. Though the two fields of study differ in many respects, they have the potential to work together to determine a more complete insight of humanity.

The Birmingham campaign illustrates this well. Men and women fought in a social war not just for their own freedom but for the freedom of many and for generations to come. Today looking back, this fight was monumental and historical. Yet it also shows many different aspects about the nature of mankind. It shows that man has a desire to better himself. Man seeks certain goodness in life, but a struggle ensues because said goodness is impossible to know fully. These philosophical thoughts, combined with history, describe life, for life itself is interdisciplinary.

What is the nature of man? What is morality? These questions have been turned over and over again, and yet there is no true absolute answer. Instead, one must simply observe the world in which he lives. He must attempt to understand it and yet accept it as it is. The pursuit of these unanswerable questions will continue as long as man lives.

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Appendix



Violence displayed in the Children's Crusade

From: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/118445649/Day-9-Birmingham-Campaign>



Eugene "Bull" Connor turning powerful water hoses on protestors

From: <http://pbsthisdayinhistory.tumblr.com/post/49437779717/may-2-1963-the-birmingham-campaigns-childrens>